



Innermost Monstrous



25 0 2

Chapter 1 by Roggen Wulf

This story challenge follows a slightly different form than most in our Saturday Story Wars series. It is not about what happens next. Instead, the challenge is to create the next original short story around the same theme.

That which frightens us most is that which we cannot fully perceive. We are as thrilled as we are afraid of the monster we cannot see. This is why our subconscious is better at giving us a scare than any horror movie. The giants which loom in that darkness, always remaining just beyond our waking comprehension, are both so very dear and damaging to us because they are of our own creation. We love to fear them, and yet we dread them and keep them shrouded in darkness. This, above all else, is why our greatest fears are so chilling to us—we cloak them in mystery.

We are going to bring monsters to the surface, drawing them to the twilight of our imaginations where their presence can be felt, sensed, but seen only darkly. Raise the beast but do not lift the shroud of mystery. Keep us in fear of what might be beyond the veil. That is your challenge.

1: Cloud Inversion

Not a breath of air stirred as Tinjin walked slowly from camp toward the rim of the canyon. Here and there, the burnt, arid landscape blazed white with patches of melting snow that had accumulated overnight. Tinjin paused, feeling the chill lifting from the morning air as the sun mounted higher in the sky.

It was seven degrees centigrade, balmy for winter. Down in the canyon, however, it was much cooler. The lack of wind prevented the air in the canyon from mixing with the warmer weather above, and the canyon floor was shrouded with a thick fog.

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Tinjin looked out across this sea of clouds. Spires and long, jagged ridges of rock rose from the vapor, like mountains and ships poised on the ocean. After eight weeks stationed on the rim, Tinjin had surveyed much of this section of the canyon and knew every cliff and crag visible from camp.

It seemed less familiar now, however, cloaked in its strange, white veil of secrecy. Cacti and small, hardy desert mammals native to this region were the only things hiding in that fog, but that knowledge did nothing to prevent a tingle from running down Tinjin's spine. Or perhaps it was simply the chill in the air.

Tinjin started back for camp but had only walked a few paces when a faint rumble passed through the stony ground. Pausing momentarily, Tinjin frowned and waited. Again, the stone seemed to tremble, an odd sensation that vibrated the soles of Tinjin's boots.

Hesitating near the brink, Tinjin turned once more to the mysterious canyon, which had sequestered itself beneath a thick, deceptively peaceful cloak. Raising a hand, Tinjin squinted against the glare, examining the canyon more carefully this time. A third rumble shook the ground, but the source of the vibration was nearer now, audible. Tinjin heard it this time.

There could be no doubt that something in the canyon had roared. A movement caught Tinjin's attention and moments later was followed by the sound of boulders falling. Before toppling over and disappearing into the fog, one of the spires of rock in the middle distance shook as if it had been rammed. The roar sounded again. Then Tinjin saw it.

A hump appeared in the inverted sea of clouds. It moved forward rapidly, like the bow wave of an invisible ship or a submarine hidden beneath the waves. Behind the thing, whatever it was, the fog turned in great eddies and whirlwinds that Tinjin estimated to be a quarter of a kilometer across or more. Something truly massive inhabited this canyon. No meteorological or geological event could account for such behavior.

Again, the vibration rose from the canyon, deafeningly loud now. Whether the bellow of some

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one side, then receded into the mist. The thing was right alongside Tinjin now, moving fast, forcing Tinjin to run to keep up with it.

Another spire jutted up through the clouds, blocking the path of the giant thing. The hump disappeared and the fog swirled. With earsplitting intensity, the roar came again from the canyon and with a crack like thunder, the spire of rock collapsed. It tumbled beneath the clouds, descending into swirling obscurity.

The fog grew still and the world fell silent. Tinjin remained on the cliff's edge for hours in stunned contemplation. What had it been? Tinjin had no way to know. What was certain, however, was that this canyon was inhabited by more than just cacti and small mammals. The day wore on, growing warmer, and the fog began to clear.

Tinjin could clearly see the devastation in the canyon below. Ridges had been scoured clean, piles of rubble littered the riverbed where spires of rock had been sent tumbling down, crushed to bits by some unknown force. There was no sign, however, of the thing that had caused such destruction. Tinjin stayed for hours, but the afternoon passed without further incident.

Six weeks passed, then Tinjin's transmissions to base abruptly stopped. When a rescue party finally arrived, Tinjin was nowhere to be found. Scrawled hastily on the day of Tinjin's final transmission, the camp's last log entry read simply, "Cloud inversion."

2: Mobilis in Mobili

The native people whose ancestors settled the forests of Vex thousands of years ago believe that the mighty River Fleuve is a blood vein of the very planet itself. They say that in the beginning of all things, it cut a path into the very heart of the world, where the gods had imprisoned a beast with no name. This, they say, is how light came to the world and how the stars came to be in the sky, a gift of the River Fleuve and a terrible curse.

When colonists began to arrive, cutting away at the forests of Vex and planting their towns on

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adventure. The surface of the River Fleuve was predictable and useful. That was all that mattered.

Marta Beeches was the only child of a colonist family. Her father owned great stocks of lumber, which when cleared away and sold provided thousands of acres of open land for his plantations. Her mother taught language and home skills to the native people, helping them become better laborers and domestic servants. Marta's parents had come to the forests of Vex when she was quite young and she had grown into a strong, venturesome youth on the river's banks.

She liked to listen to the sounds that the water fowl made on the river at night. This love often drew the fifteen-year-old out of bed in secret to sit and admire the Fleuve as it drifted peacefully by through the wee hours of the morning. On the night the natives fled Beeches Landing in anticipation of its destruction, they said they felt the coming disaster like the tone of a drum on the wind.

Marta opened one eye slightly and peered at the river. From where she lay dozing with her back comfortably resting against a tree trunk, she could see the blood-red reflection of the moon on the dark water. It was not a sound that had awoken her but the silence. Her beloved birds had gone silent, occasionally murmuring apprehensively from the reeds the lined the banks before quieting themselves.

Opening her eyes and sitting up straight, resting her hands on her bare knees, Marta watched the water curiously. The River Fleuve seemed to flow past her with a foreign sense of urgency that at once startled her and piqued her interest. As she stood up, she caught sight of the silvery backs of fish reflecting against the moonlight as they swam hurriedly downstream.

Suddenly, the backs of a very different animal broke the surface. She had heard tales of the creature known as the saba rundi, or water wolf, but had never seen one herself. Here before her eyes, a whole pod of the crocodilian mammals—hairy, amphibious relatives of whales; blew water from their blow holes as they cruised downriver.

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The lights upstream caught her attention only when she realized to her surprise that they were moving and not the stars reflected in the water. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of the tiny points of light moved beneath the surface. They flowed in irregular ways in the depths of the river, sometimes rising higher, stretching out in long nebulae-like columns that resembled thick, disorganized arms.

Marta had seen displays of light very much like this before. When she was a young girl on the voyage that took her across the sea, the prow of their steamship would excite tiny creatures in the water at night. The phosphorescent plankton put on brilliant light shows when disturbed, glowing intense and spiraling greens, golds, and even purples. At first, she believed this to be what she was seeing in the river. As she watched, however, she decided that the movements of the lights beneath the water were too organized and consistent to be agitated animalcules.

The lights stretched and sought, moved, gathered and dispersed but never faded and seemed to travel as one. Marta's growing suspicion told her that this was a single creature, one of grand scale, whose appearance beneath the water and very nature was a complete mystery to her.

She found it difficult to judge its true size, but as she watched, one of its long, probing, seemingly amorphous arms passed close to one of her father's old steam barges, which had sunk in the river during a storm. The river was very deep here, and Marta now saw that the barge had come to rest on a rock ledge, which was many fathoms below the surface of the water but still nowhere near the bottom of the river. The star-spotted creature illuminated the barge beneath while another of its arms stroked the top of the water, kicking up a wave that sloshed at the banks and soaked Marta's bare feet.

The thing in the water was certainly larger than the barge, perhaps by many, many meters. In awe and excitement, Marta continued to watch, frustrated that she could not see more of the beast than just its starry, multicolored spots, which revealed little about its form.

Returning to the tree, she grabbed up her torch and turned it on. Pointing the bright beam into the water, she directed it at the creature which had made its way steadily downstream until it

was in the middle of the river in front of her. The moment her torch beam fell upon the beast, the great animal swiftly receded deep within the River Plouffe.

Marta watched it with bated breath. They both seemed to regard each other for a long moment, the night falling completely silent, though the girl sensed

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a foreboding agitation that seemed to permeate the very air around her.

Suddenly and with explosive rapidity, the creature expanded. A vast galaxy spread beneath the river. It dominated all of the river she could see, pitch blackness full of untold many stars. Marta stared, a feeling of discomfort gathering in her stomach, which quickly turned to fear as she realized that the thing was rising toward her.

Turning, she hurled the torch away from her. The creature lurched toward the light with terrifying speed and yet still filled the entire river. It quickly realized the trick and returned its attention to Marta, who stumbled backward, then scrambled away from the water and scaled the bank as fast as her legs could carry her.

Bare feet pounding the ground as she tore through the trees, she could hear the creature pursuing even over the booming sound of her pulse and her ragged breathing. Marta ran as hard as she was able, the lights of Beeches Landing appearing before her as she fled the beast. The buildings of the little company town were only a few tens of meters away. Marta raced toward the edge of the trees, but was doomed never to reach them.

Something seized hold of her ankle in the darkness. Its grip was icy, wet, invincible. Marta hit the ground hard, crying out in pain as she collided with the earth face first. Scrabbling for a hold, she screamed again as she was dragged backward. She clawed at the dirt, snatched at roots and branches in vain as she sped backward toward the forbidding waters of the River Fleuve.

The knowing traveler can still find the ruins of Beeches Landing if they are determined enough to brave the forests of Vex. Its former occupants disappeared one night, leaving shattered, empty buildings behind. Authorities claim that the little outpost was destroyed in a rebellion staged by disgruntled laborers.

The native people whose ancestors settled the forests of Vex thousands of years ago, however, tell a different story. Once a year on the night when the blood-red moon is reflected on the water, a girl with bare feet emerges from the River Fleuve to stand amid the remains of Beeches

Landing. Watching the forests of Vex with eyes black as a polished stone and filled with bright, burning points of light, she danced. She brought light to world and put the stars in the sky.

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